

# The Grace of Wrath

Studies in the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Text

Chapter 2:12-17

Topic

Jesus gives the believers in Pergamos a glimpse into their spiritual warfare when He tells them that Satan has his throne in their city

Title

*"Glimpse of Thrones"*

Introduction

*"Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?"*

Indiana Jones suffered from a fear of snakes brought on from when he fell into a crate of them aboard the Dunn and Duffy Circus Train in 1912 while trying to evade Fedora, from whom the young Indy had taken the Cross of Coronado.

Jones frequently ran across snakes in his adventures - most famously when he discovered the Temple of the Forbidden Eye, which had a chamber filled with snakes, including one gigantic cobra.

That cobra, by the way, now lives in Adventureland in Anaheim

A lot of us, like Indiana Jones, have a natural aversion to snakes.

In Pergamos, an unusual encounter with snakes was something that folks came from all over the Roman Empire to experience.

Pergamos was the center for the worship of the deity known as Asclepius. He was the God of healing. In Greek sculpture he was usually depicted as a bearded man holding a serpent-entwined staff. It is why we to this day represent medicine with the serpent on the pole.

According to William Barclay, there was a medical school at the temple to Asclepius in Pergamos. Sick and diseased people from all over the Roman Empire flocked there for relief.

Think Stanford, or Sansum Clinic, or Loma Linda.

The "treatment" they received was unusual, to say the least. The sick would spend the night in the darkness of the temple. In the temple there were tame snakes. In the night the sufferer might be touched by one of these tame and harmless snakes as it glided over the ground on which he or she lay. The touch of the snake was held to be the touch of the god himself, and the touch was believed to bring health and healing.

As this letter unfolds we'll definitely see a snake. We'll see Satan slithering around the church seeking to 'touch' the believers - not for healing but for deception. His strategy was to entice believers to compromise by adding pagan practices to their worship of Jesus.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Refuse To Compromise And You Reveal Jesus Enthroned, and #2 Choose To Compromise And You Reveal Satan Enthroned.

## #1 Refuse To Compromise And You Reveal Jesus Enthroned

(v12-13)

Where do we get this idea that compromise is at the heart of the problem in Pergamos?

In verse fourteen Jesus will remind us of what He calls "the doctrine of Balaam." I don't want to get deep into it until we get to verse fourteen, but the doctrine of Balaam was his advice to the enemy of Israel that they send their women into the camp to invite the men to feast with them. The feasting involved both idol worship and having sex with the women.

As a satanic strategy, it worked flawlessly to the detriment of the Jews.

Pergamos was home to many temples in addition to the one to Asclepius. There was a temple to Zeus, as well as to Athena, and also Dionysus.

In these temples, feasts were held, during which the meat was sacrificed to the particular idol representing the god. If you attended the feast, you'd be participating in idol worship.

Many of the rituals in these temples involved immoral sexual acts with the priests and priestesses who represented the so-called god.

It was, quite simply, the doctrine of Balaam all over again.

Rev 2:12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword:

Their "angel," their pastor, was reading the entire Revelation of Jesus Christ to them, when they came across a personal letter to them.

The first thing they heard was a particular characteristic from the description of Jesus in chapter one. Jesus addressed them as the One Who "has the sharp two-edged sword."

Reference is made to this sword seven times in the Bible (Luke 2:35; Revelation 1:16, 2:12 & 16, 6:8, 19:15 & 21). The last two references, in chapter nineteen of the Revelation, make it clear we're talking about the Word of God since it proceeds out of Jesus' mouth.

The "sharp two-edged sword" reminds the church at Pergamos that they are in a fierce spiritual battle.

The emphasis on it being two-edged means two things:

1. It means Jesus can wield it to defeat their enemies.
2. It means there's an edge on the sword that can be used on **them** - to slice away things that are harmful. It is, perhaps, where we get our expression, "it cuts both ways."

Jesus was, therefore, promising victory, but warning them to maintain separation from the pagan influences seeking to undermine their testimony.

We always fight from victory; but we must fight. In this case, we fight by remaining separated from the idolatry and immorality of the world.

Rev 2:13 "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

The words "your works" do not appear in the best manuscripts, but we understand that Jesus certainly "knows" everything about His churches, and everyone in them.

The real emphasis was on knowing where they dwelt. Jesus was familiar with the pressures of their environment. He knew they were besieged by the world. In fact, He knew something they did not. Their city was Ground Zero for the devil. Pergamos was "Satan's throne."

We believe in a personal devil. There is a supernatural being, a fallen angel, who heads a rebellion of fallen angels against God.

He is not, however, in any way equal with God, and there is no doubt as to his destiny.

Satan is not omnipresent; he is not everywhere at once. In the first century, he was in Pergamos.

They held fast to Jesus' "Name," meaning the truth about Him as revealed in Scripture. What is that truth? It is that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh, Who died but Who is risen from the dead.

They "did not deny My faith" even when facing death for it. Antipas is given as an example. Not much is known of him beyond what Jesus says here. Church tradition says he was put inside an idol in the form of a brass bull and roasted to death.

Faced with the pressure to deny Jesus or die, Antipas chose to die a martyr, and the believers stood with him at great risk.

The believers refused to compromise in order to save their own lives. It was a powerful testimony that Jesus was enthroned. No matter who was the Caesar at the time, Jesus was their King.

Lately, with ISIS on the move, the world is seeing Christians being targeted for their faith in Jesus Christ.

According to an article by Jim Daly of Focus on the Family, the 21 Coptic Christians were working in Libya because they were trying to feed their families in Egypt, who are starving due to the poor conditions there. The news media is not telling you that these ISIS members tried to get the 21 to deny their faith through torture before beheading them. And the news is not telling you these believers sang songs of praise to Jesus while they were being beheaded.

They did not deny Jesus. They would not compromise. They chose to reveal Jesus enthroned.

## #2 Choose To Compromise And You Reveal Satan Enthroned

(v14-17)

We might someday be called upon to be faithful unto death. But persecution is not the only weapon in the devil's arsenal. He always has the doctrine of Balaam to use against us.

Rev 2:14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.

We come to what Jesus had "against" them. It was the other side of the two-edged sword.

Jesus said "you have there." They were tolerating folks who held these two false doctrines.

Balaam's story is recorded in the Old Testament Book of Numbers, in chapters twenty-two through twenty-four. The nation of Israel was marching from Egypt to the Promised Land. No nation could withstand them on their journey as they walked with God through the wilderness.

King Balak of Moab was terrified of them. He sent for a Gentile seer named Balaam, to employ him to curse the nation of Israel. Three times Balaam tried to curse them but each time God overcame him and the words he spoke blessed them instead.

Unable to curse them, but still desiring the money that Balak had offered him, Balaam counseled Balak on how he might yet stop the march of the Jews. Balaam told Balak to send the Moabite temple priestesses into the camp of Israel to seduce the Jewish men into celebrating their pagan feast of Baal-Peor. The feast involved idolatry and sexual immorality.

Balaam understood that the only way to defeat them was to entice them to sin against God. Then He would have to discipline them.

The plan worked. The Israelite men worshipped idols, and had sex with the priestesses.

Their compromise had devastating results. God sent a plague into the camp of the Israelites that killed twenty-four thousand of them.

Compromise from inside the camp had accomplished what no sword could have in conquering God's people.

The plague was finally stopped when Phinnehas entered a tent where an Israelite and a Moabite woman were having sex and ran them through with a sword.

In Pergamos, the doctrine of Balaam was the encouragement that it was OK to go to the feasts, to participate in the rituals, even though it involved idol worship. The believers were not doing it - not yet, anyway; but they were tolerating those who advocated it, and that could only lead to compromise.

Let me give you a contemporary example where the church is compromising in an area of immorality. I understand the reality that many individuals - even among Christians - have same-sex attraction.

Whether you have a same-sex attraction, or an opposite-sex attraction, and whether you were born that way, or whether it is a learned behavior, God has established His rules and regulations for marriage, and for sexual activity outside of marriage.

Biblical marriage is a monogamous, heterosexual union of one man and one woman that ought to last as long as they both live.



Sex outside of this holy union is always sin - whether it is *heterosexual* or *homosexual*. The apostle Paul makes this clear in First Thessalonians 4:3 when he says, "you must abstain from sexual immorality."

Biblical scholar Dr. William Welty says of this crucial word, "sexual immorality, "the general word connotes a plethora of sexual behavior. This all-encompassing word contained within its meaning **all concepts of non-marital homosexual and heterosexual behavior.**"

- A person who is attracted to someone of the opposite sex, who is not their husband or their wife, is sinning if they dwell upon it in their heart, or if they act upon it in their sexual behavior. Instead, they "must abstain from sexual immorality."
- A person who is attracted to someone of the same sex is sinning if they dwell upon it, or act upon it in their sexual behavior; and all such thinking and behaving is always outside the definition of biblical marriage. They must "abstain from sexual immorality."

Nevertheless, according to author and former megachurch pastor Rob Bell, the Christian church at large is "moments away" from accepting homosexual marriage.

Speaking to Oprah on her *Super Soul Sunday* program, Bell said that it was "inevitable" that churches would change their position.

Many already have. It's the doctrine of Balaam repackaged.

Contrary to the current trend in evangelical churches, we cannot compromise and redefine biblical marriage because of what is happening in the world.

We can't do it for those who identify as heterosexual; and we can't do it for those who identify as homosexual.

Back to Pergamos. A big part of the strategy of Satan was to get the believers to attend the pagan feasts, to get them to compromise by being on-scene for the worship of idols; and to soften them up to accept the world's immorality.

Fact is, there was some great eating going on at those feasts. The food was superb.

In those days, you didn't go to McDonalds; you went to McZeus. There was no In-N-Out; only Dine-N-Dionysus.

We need to understand, also, that **these meals were not always religious events**. All kinds of public and private feasts were held at these temples. They were the *only* venues where you could host a big shindig.

It was one thing to say "No" to an invite to worship Zeus outright. It was another thing entirely to say "No" to your neighbor's anniversary, because it was being held in the temple of Zeus, and served by its priests and priestesses after the meat was openly sacrificed to his idol.

Or to say "No" to a wedding... or a birthday party... or a retirement party.

"No" was the only answer you could, in good Christian conscience, give. You'd have to forego the invitation, and thereby subject yourself to ridicule and persecution.

Balaam wasn't the only falsehood in Pergamos.

Revelation 2:15 "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

We just don't know anything, not really, about "the doctrine of the Nicolaitans." Anything I said would be mere speculation.

There is some indication in the way the Greek words are used that the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was similar to that of Balaam in that both led to idolatry and immorality.

Rev 2:16 Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.

If the world has crept in to our church we need to "repent." Repent of what, exactly? Our own worldliness?

Of course. But in this case, because of what Jesus said next, I believe we are to also "repent" that we've allowed worldliness to co-exist in the church and no one is doing a thing about it.

It's not enough that I remain orthodox. I must speak out against error and get it out of our church.

If the believers at Pergamos did not repent, then Jesus would come and fight against "them" – against those who had crept in and were being tolerated.

There is a very strong distinction in this phrase between "you" – the believers – and "them" – the false teachers. The believers should do something about them or else the Lord will come and do what needed to be done.

*"Get your fight on!"* Is what Jesus was and is saying. If we won't fight, He eventually will come and fight.

We don't know what happened in Pergamos, but sadly, history teaches us that the church, in later years, did not repent, but instead got into bed with the world.

From 100AD until 312AD Christians were subjected to all sorts of persecution under the reign of ten particularly cruel Caesars. Yet the church grew stronger than ever. Instead of hindering the growth of the church, it was helping it.

A change of satanic strategy was in order. By 312AD there was a struggle for power in the Roman Empire. A young man named Constantine prepared to engage in battle. According to legend, he saw a cross in the heavens and heard a voice say, "In this sign conquer." Thus you have the so-called conversion of Constantine to Christianity.

What probably happened was this: Substantially outnumbered, Constantine noticed that a large segment of the population was not enlisting in either army. They were the Christians. His so-called conversion provided him with an infusion of new troops. He went on to conquer Maxentius in a pivotal battle, and when he marched into Rome he was hailed as the undisputed Emperor.

As it turned out, Constantine conquered more than an opposing army. In a sense, he conquered the church - not permanently, for Jesus has told us that the gates of Hell cannot prevail against the church; and He always has a remnant of true believers.

Constantine's so-called conversion led to certain reforms in the Roman Empire that had disastrous consequences for Christians.

- Pagan priests and practices were integrated into the worship of the Christian church.
- Anyone who submitted to baptism was considered a Christian, and most people did, because being a Christian was now popular and expected.

The church was free from persecution from the outside, but faced a devastating enemy now from the inside that was leading Christians to compromise.

Rev 2:17 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it." ' "

As with all seven letters, this one had and has application beyond the church at Pergamos. If you "have ears," *it is for you*.

We are overcomers, by virtue of being born-again recipients of the resurrection power of Jesus to say "Yes" to Him enthroned as our King.

We also must put overcoming into action by walking with the Lord, in harmony with what is pleasing to Him.

What's up with "hidden manna" and "a white stone" with a "new name written on it?"

Archaeologists and historians agree that a person's name, written on a white stone, was used as a token to gain entry into feasts and festivals.

Adam Clarke wrote:

There is an allusion here to conquerors in the public games, who were not only conducted with great pomp into the city to which they belonged, but had a white stone given to them, with their name inscribed on it; which badge entitled them, during their whole life, to be maintained at the public expense... These were called *tesserae* among the Romans...

A white stone was the wristband or hand-stamp of its day - alerting the bouncers at the door that you were an invited guest.

The believers in Pergamos were refusing invitations to the various feasts and had become social outcasts.

No matter. There is a greater feast coming, one that we are not only invited to, but are its honored guests

At the end of the Revelation, at the Second Coming of Jesus to the earth, He will host the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and His Bride. ***That's us.*** We will feast with Him; He will once again drink of the fruit of the vine - something Jesus said He would not do until then.

This helps us understand the reference to "hidden manna." Manna was the bread from Heaven that miraculously fed the children of Israel during their forty years in the wilderness.

The believers in Pergamos might be passing-up some great eating by refusing to compromise, but a meal was coming that would put all those meals to shame.

Will we only have manna to go with the fruit of the vine at our Marriage Supper? If so, I'm OK with it.

Manna probably represents the fact that we look forward to heavenly food, whatever is on its menu, and shouldn't be sad that we miss the idolatrous, immoral feasting of the world.

The "new name" on your white stone is a secret known only to you and Jesus. It's your personal identifier.

Is it *your* new name? Or is it a new name that you use for Jesus?

*It could be either!*

- In the Old Testament, Abram was renamed Abraham, and Jacob was renamed Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus told Simon that he would be called Peter.
- At the same time we know of at least seven hundred different names or titles for Jesus in our Bible. It is not unthinkable each of us could call Him by a unique and endearing name.

Think of this as a 'pet' name that Jesus has for you and vice-versa. Don't you have endearing, pet names for those you love? A name that no one else is really allowed to use? That's the idea here.

Your white stone won't just have your name. It will have your *new* name - a name given to you by Jesus. An endearing name; an enduring name.

Persecution or compromise. Those are two primary strategies of Satan against the church.

People sometimes ask, "Why does the devil continue to kill Christians, since it only makes the church stronger?"

It's because he is a murderer, according to the Bible, and seems to have an insatiable blood-lust.

Christians are being killed, right now, for their faith in Jesus.

We are not. Know what that means? **It means that Satan's strategy against us is to introduce the doctrine of Balaam, in order to get us to compromise with the world.**

**It means the devil has something, or someone, that is trying to seduce you to turn to idols from God.**

There's no question he **is** doing this. The only question is, "Do I recognize the attack?"

In other words, Am I... Are we... *Really* taking serious the lure of idolatry and immorality that will ruin us from within?

Let's root out the doctrine of Balaam from our church, if it's here.

But even more so, let's root it out from our lives, if it's there.